

B O R D E R C R O S S I N G

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It is October 2010 and, in a modest, white-walled art gallery in the heart of the Marais district of Paris, the fashion designer Hussein Chalayan is showing his Spring/Summer 2011 collection. Far from the madding crowd, and seemingly a million miles away from the brouhaha that the twice-yearly international womenswear collections normally entail, Chalayan's offering takes the form of a short film. A single, spotlit model mimics the choreography of the traditional runway presentation but there's no throbbing soundtrack, attention-seeking styling and hair and make-up or over-crowded seating plan. An audience that can be counted on 10 fingers takes the place of the usual circus. Chalayan – dressed, as is usual, in unassuming black jeans and sweater – is in attendance, taking the time to talk press and buyers through the proceedings, explaining both the concepts behind the collection and the construction of the garments. Both receive equal attention, now as always. Chalayan has long claimed that the primary use of narrative in his work functions to ensure that his own interest is sustained and that the clothes speak for themselves. It has tended to be the ideas and stories surrounding his collections that have driven Chalayan. These are also the elements that have captivated anyone with more than a passing interest in the history of fashion, as Chalayan's tales have added considerable depth to his designs. In the gallery, on rails at either side of the screen hangs his collection in the flesh, enabling visitors to touch and look at the clothes up close. There's an apparently simple lightweight black wool dress here, a sweet godet skirt in white cotton viole there. Colour blocking, in this designer's hands, is as subtle as it is unexpected: dove grey with burnt orange and beige, for example. The ubiquitous summer floral comes with its own shadow adding a discreet sense of melancholy to its effect.

The collection is called *Sakoku* – literally translated as 'locked country'. The title refers to the name of Japan's foreign relations policy from 1639 to 1868 dictating that, with very few exceptions, no foreigner could enter and no native could leave on penalty of death. Exploring what Chalayan states are the more surreal aspects of Japanese culture, *Sakoku* focused, above all, on disembodiment, a subject to which he has returned again and again. Chalayan writes of this interest in his notes to the film: 'Japan is saturated with disembodied experiences in a decentred space where event is born out of the choreography of ceremony and the simulation of thought.'



Sakoku, Spring/Summer 2011.
Still from a video by Hussein Chalayan.
See 'New Anthropology' ♡ p.224.

Three months before *Sakoku* premieres, and Chalayan is ensconced in his central London studio. On a laptop is what he calls his 'concept file': a collection of words and images gathered on a recent trip to Japan, originally pulled together simply because he liked them or they piqued his interest in some way. This will soon, painstakingly, be worked into a more unified form. It might only be expected that when a designer such as Chalayan chooses to base his collection on a specific place – a country where he is a tourist (the role of tourist being another of his enduring fascinations) – the end result would be less than literal. Chalayan has thought about water, he tells me, and the fact that Japan is an island somehow longing to return to the depths. An image of a tree, the branches of which are heavy with cherry blossoms and which is threatened by a looming tsunami, appears on his laptop screen. This reference will become part of *Sakoku*, as waves of silk draping across the surface of a structured bodice. In an earthquake prone country, every moment is monumental, the designer reasons. Another photograph is on Chalayan's screen: shot from above, a group of male, Japanese executives sit at a matt black boardroom table while the walls fall in around

them. This idea will find its way into the clothing as 'collapsing' panels, Chalayan says. The aforementioned floral print has its roots in a snapshot of a row of single flowers. Flower arranging is an integral part of Japanese culture, the designer explains, here is the antithesis of a bouquet.

In a separate file labelled 'design' Chalayan's own drawings are gathered. For each collection there are literally hundreds of these, from rough sketches – made, for example, while at a kabuki performance – to drawings of finished garments. Increasingly detailed patterns and fabric descriptions show the way in which, slowly but surely, most of Chalayan's thoughts are translated into garments. Specifically, in *Sakoku*, Chalayan explores the prevalence of shadow references in Japanese culture – manifest, for example, in shadow theatre – and found in the designer's collection in his choice of print and fabric, such as the use of opaque fabric juxtaposed with panels of iridescent mesh. Then there's *Haiku*, a section in which bonded, chiffon dresses are draped individually to form the word *sonzaisuru*, meaning 'to exist', although only a Japanese speaker would ever be able to decipher it.

Sakoku, then, was an immaculately executed and carefully thought out affair. And if the end result, as far as presentation is concerned, was very different from the blockbuster shows with which Chalayan, in London in the mid-1990s, made his name, its creation involved the sum of similar parts nonetheless. Characterising Chalayan's work since he started out has been a preoccupation with symbolising ideas through the structural and design elements of clothing, and a fascination with and commitment to technological advancement and innovative, highly complex proportion and cut, as well as the process of editing his original ideas. Only those wishing to unravel the end result will ever be fully aware of the thought process behind his finished collections.

'I work like a [film] director, I think,' he tells me, 'framing things that already exist. But if you go and have dinner at someone's house and you enjoy it, you don't have to know all the ingredients, do you?'

It is, in fact, an approach more familiar to the artist than the fashion designer. And if it seems somewhat cerebral, especially seen in the context of the largely ephemeral and more obviously commercially driven fashion arena, equally significant is Chalayan's warmly expressed fascination with humanity – anthropologically, socially and culturally – that invests his whole oeuvre with an emotional strength that is as precious as it is rare. Whichever way one chooses to look at it, Chalayan is not in the business of crafting, say, the perfect black cashmere sweater or pair of black trousers – although he has proved in the past that he can do this also. Instead, the value of his own-label designs lies in their difference. In today's over-saturated market, Chalayan's voice rings out, if not loudly, then certainly with a clarity that makes it instantly recognisable to those already familiar with his language, not to mention highly appealing to any newcomer looking for something that ensures they stand out in a crowd.

Much has been written about the value of biography to criticism. There are those who argue that any life story is irrelevant and that a more purist approach pays attention to creative output alone. Others find a more personal reading to be revealing – the understanding of the psychological and cultural makeup of any creator adds to understanding of their work. In the case of Chalayan, whose work has often been infused with his own history, it seems nothing short of obstructive to separate the two. Most often mentioned is that Chalayan is a Turkish Cypriot. Any correlation may be quite literal. For example, look closely at the seemingly Hawaiian-style prints that characterise the designer's Spring/Summer 2004 collection, *Temporal Meditations*, and these prints turn out to depict the Turkish Cypriot seafront complete with the requisite high-rise architecture that any beach holiday resort today has succumbed to. In the print's background, images of historical battle scenes between the Ottomans and Venetians hint at less picturesque truths about the continuously war-torn island. Less obvious is the fact that, while working on this collection, Chalayan also actually

collaborated with a genetic anthropologist who performed a DNA test on him and helped him trace not only his own genetic makeup but also that of the different ethnic groups that inhabit island. From his mother (mitochondrial DNA), Chalayan was told he inherited the first fully sequenced human mitochondrial DNA, the Cambridge Reference Sequence which is common in Europe. His Y chromosome (male line) is Viking.



Detail of print designed by Hussein Chalayan for *Temporal Meditations*, Spring/Summer 2004.

'Knowing about the DNA sequences I've inherited from my parents did not suddenly mean that I would start to identify myself with Continental Europe, with Swedes, Danes, or the English, or to deny my Turkishness,' Chalayan wrote in *anOther Magazine* in 2007. 'But it really made me wonder about who we think we are, and whether our connections to geography and our definitions of identity are as set as we think they are.'

More often, autobiographical contact is less specific. Chalayan's obsession with flight and migration, say, is presumably rooted at least in part in his being required to travel from place to place by air as a child just as he does to visit his relatives – or vice versa – to this day. With this in mind, some of his earliest work was crafted in Tyvek, printed with the words *par avion*,

and could be folded up into an envelope and sent through the post. Also suggestive of a nomadic lifestyle was Chalayan's Autumn/Winter 1998 collection, *Panoramic*, in which knitted jackets were protectively cocoon shaped and came with their own knitting needles attached. For this designer's highly inquisitive mind, any interest soon reaches beyond personal experience, however. Air travel is a continuing fascination for Chalayan – he also directed a short film on the subject titled *Anaesthetics* (2004), explaining that, for him, it represents one of the many ways in which violence is hidden through codes of behaviour. Cleverly designed seating, in-flight refreshment, entertainment and artificial air, Chalayan believes, lull travellers into a false sense of security, as if they've never left the ground.

'I don't really feel at home anywhere,' he says. 'In Cyprus, which is really my family hub, I feel like an alien. I don't go there very often any more. I go to Istanbul a lot, which I find to be an incredible magical city. I speak the language, of course. Essentially, I suppose, I think of myself as a Londoner more than anything. I'm not English, I'm a Londoner and I see London as a state in itself. I'm very interested in that as subject matter.'

Hussein Chalayan is a Turkish Cypriot born in Nicosia in 1970 but, following the divorce of his parents, moved between two entirely different cultures throughout his childhood. When living with his mother, he was immersed in his troubled and essentially insular birthplace, an environment both ravaged by infighting and steeped in mystery – as a boy Chalayan could only imagine what was happening on the Greek side of the border, forcibly established in 1974. And imagine it he did, creating superstitious codes – if he folded his pyjamas a certain way, for example – in the hope that it would ensure that his homeland would remain at peace.

'I am essentially a curious person,' he says, 'and I come from a culture which has seen two wars, from an amorphous culture, with a real history behind it. I think in a country where there is less history, less difficulty, maybe people become less prone to questioning things.'